

On the Record: The Republican Incumbent

An Interview With President Reagan on Campaign Questions

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WASHINGTON, March 28 — Following are excerpts from a White House transcript of an interview with President Reagan today by Francis X. Clines and Steven R. Weisman:

Q. The first question we'd like to ask you, Mr. President, is one that we've asked the Democratic Presidential candidates and that is, what do you think is the most important problem facing the United States in the next decade and what would you have for dealing with it?

A. Well, I think the problem remains, and it's a group of problems. And that is, maintaining and continuing this expansion of our economy so that we can provide enough jobs for the future and opportunity for all of our people. I think it is the problem of achieving a lasting peace through the reduction, particularly, of nuclear weapons in the world, and reduce, hopefully, one day, eliminate that and the threat that hangs over us.

I think others — to help if we can those nations that are trying to establish democracy, to become working members of the family of nations. And I believe that the restoration of some traditional values, family, neighborhood. Distortions occurred down through the last few decades of the relationship within our own country of our different levels of government and to restore authority and autonomy to those levels where the Federal Government has assumed too much of it. I'll probably not give you more answers to that later but right now, I think that's covered basically: the economy, the economic expansion that is needed and that we have embarked on; and peace in the world, reductions of the tensions in the armaments.

Q. Yesterday you joked quietly about it and then said seriously you take the deficit problem. Could you be more specific? How serious a problem is it and what would you do to deal with it?

A. Well, that would be a part of the overall generic answer that I gave about the economy. Yes, the deficit is a problem. No one can ignore it. But it's been going for some 50 years. And through most of that time, almost totally in that time, it has been a deliberate action of Government policy and some of us who complained about it back through the years have always said that it would get literally out of control, that you could not go on the way without coming to a day of reckoning. And we now are at that day of reckoning. I think the basic part of the deficit is due to government itself and the excessive share of the people's earnings, the gross national product, that the Government is taking. And so we're going to continue. We made a proposal for the down payment in the next three years, so it's pretty much divided between tax revenues, not by raising rates but by eliminating some tax practices that we think aren't fairly with it.

And that, of course, is a part of this temporary down payment, but at the same time I have ordered the Treasury Department to mark on the entire tax structure how we can collect the uncollected tax that is being evaded by people who owe it and don't pay, since the tax system, broaden the base, hopefully reduce the rate to individuals.

Plans for Social Security

Q. You made mention last week in pointing out that you had a new point to restructure Social Security for new workers coming into the program. Could you elaborate on that?

A. I think we have to, we've got to look at the whole governmental structure, and that includes looking at entitlement programs. There have been demographic changes that have been ignored, that make some policies that are now ineffectual. And so we're on other day of reckoning if we don't reorder those programs. About half of our deficit has been caused by Social Security. About half of your deficit has been caused by Social Security. About half of your deficit has been caused by Social Security. About half of your deficit has been caused by Social Security.

And we are eliminating that end, the cyclical, by the recovery that is taking place, and evidence of that is that just between August and the first of the year our own projections of the deficit were reduced by \$15 billion because we have taken that much more tax revenue than we had anticipated due to the recovery in the economy.

Q. Mr. President, on the entitlements, can you be more specific about this restructuring? Is it a year in which you are asking voters to return you to office. Can't you be more specific about what you would do for Medicare and Social Security?

A. No, not really, because this is something that is going to require thorough study to insure that you do not pull the rug out from under anyone who presently depends on those programs. They must not be frightened, as they have been, by political demagoguery, as they were in the '52 campaign when our opponents took advantage of the fact that Social Security, the program that was facing, by our data, July 1, 1984, faced outright bankruptcy, and they denied this. Then they waged a political campaign that we were out, in some ways, that, Oh, did you know we're going to do this or that or that to you?

Q. If you could be more specific, you could put some of these fears to rest, couldn't you?

A. Well, I had tried and everyone else has tried to have said Social Security problems that nothing must be done to penalize those people who are now dependent on these checks. But what we need to do is a revamping of the program. We finally then when the election was over and the demagoguery was stopped and our opponents agreed to a bipartisan get-together to find an answer to the immediate problem.

Intentions for Recipients

Q. But isn't it risky now, in an election year, for you to say that we should revamp and restructure these programs without being specific?

A. No. As long as they understand and as long as you will print that what I said, that there is no intention on the part of anyone of taking away what we've been giving to the people, it would be well if you printed that the rebuttal to the demagoguery of the '52 campaign is the fact that today, the average couple, married couple, on Social Security, is getting \$180 a month. And we're going to continue to do that. So these are our goals and our purposes. But I — there is no way to answer it until we have gone into a study of the whole actuarial situation.

Q. You mentioned broadening the tax base as an objective in your tax simplification study. Would you accept the tax simplification study that would lead to, in effect, an increased tax burden or would your goal be to keep the tax burden the same as it is now?

A. I am looking for a program that can bring about simplification but I am not looking for a program that would take away from the people. This is what we set out to do. And simplification, what we are looking toward, and I can't answer now because it is a study that has to be a very complex subject. When you say broaden the tax base, that means you're talking about the payment of taxes, people, now who for one reason or the other have been able to in many instances, remain tax free or pay less than below what they should be paying.

Q. We just ask once more if it's correct in the rate of growth that has been achieved in the economy that has...



IN THE OVAL OFFICE: President Reagan after being interviewed yesterday.

thus it limits your ability to reduce the overall burden on individuals by tax rate cuts because of the lost revenue.

Cuts in Military Budget

Q. You've accepted a reduction this time around in the budget fight, in the rate of defense growth. We wanted to know whether that's a real reduction or are you just stretching it out.

A. To be able to make such a reduction as we did involves some elements of stretching it out. But it means that over a longer period of time, the same amount of money is distributed so that you have people taking a longer time with their taxes to pay for it. But the defense budget is not stretched by how much you want to spend. It's determined by what is necessary to guarantee our security and thus the demagoguery of the '52 campaign to those who approach the budget from the standpoint of let's make it this percentage of the budget, let's cut this amount of money, how do you have national security on that basis? Everything that you're going to cut from the defense budget, you have to say does this reduce to an unacceptable point our ability to preserve our security? If it does then you can't make that cut.

If you can delay, if you can postpone, some things and you look and in looking at the potential advantages in the world, what emergencies might arise? This is not an unacceptable risk. We can do that, particularly when it is to help bring about the economic strengthening.

Now we have been doing this and we have, we ourselves, with all of the talk about defense spending as being the source of added funds for reduction of the deficit, and I've seen terms used many times in the media, that record defense spending. It's record if you take the number of dollars without regard to the value of those dollars. It is far below any record at all. There is no hint of such thing, if you take it as a percentage of national product, and in either one of those ratings, our defense spending is far below what was customary back through the years.

Now how do you arrive at a lower defense spending, ever? You arrive at it by the other thing that we're trying to bring about. And that is a reduction in armaments. With those who could be considered possible adversaries. Then if you have a reduction of the threat you can have a reduction of the deterrent, of the deterrent on our side. And that is a road toward lesser defense spending.

Q. Can we just ask once more if it's correct in the rate of growth that has...

been accepted now as primarily a postponement of the buildup? A deferred of the buildup? Or do you see it as causing any elimination of anything that you had in mind?

A. Not in the sense of weapons systems reducing manpower. They are, let me be honest, this whole thing is definitely not all postponement. We have been working, and as a matter of fact have made \$18 billion cuts in the defense budget ourselves before we even took this further step. But much of that was based on things that we ourselves have been discovering, as we have in every other area of government.

Q. May I ask you about East-West tensions? Are there no further steps that the United States can take unilaterally, now, to reduce tensions with the Soviet Union or to persuade them to return to the negotiating table. For instance, submitting the threshold test ban treaty for ratification, which I think is on their list.

A. We are in conversations with the Soviet Union on a number of things of this kind. And on things like, we'll soon be talking about a chemical warfare treaty. And in regard to their position, I think the tensions are actually more evident in the rhetoric than they are in actuality. I think that there is less tension today and less threat of danger than we've had in the past. There was a window of vulnerability that we have now closed. We and they have agreed now to come back to negotiations on one of the three treaties that they've walked out on, the conventional weapons treaty, the multiple balanced force treaty. We're hopeful that they will come back in the others. We have made it plain that we're flexible. Why, we have made a proposal, we have evidenced our willingness to negotiate what may be differing views of theirs.

An example of that, the intermediate range nuclear forces in Europe. The first proposal was, and I think it's a compromise proposal, and that was on both sides. You eliminate them all of that type of weapon. Well, the Soviets wouldn't even hear of it.

We said, all right then, granted that would be our goal, and we think it's a good goal, but we're willing then, to talk whatever reduction in numbers that we can make that would be verifiable, that would be fair and even for both sides. And that still remains on the table.

Q. The Administration seems to have taken the position now that no...

revisions or revised proposals will be offered until they come to the negotiating table and then you might have something. Is that correct?

A. No. What we're saying is we are not going to sit here negotiating with ourselves, and while they sit out there not participating waiting to see what we'll finally come up with. That would be very poor negotiating strategy. We have said to them, we're flexible, we're willing to negotiate fair and verifiable agreements when they are ready to come back to the table.

Events in Middle East

Q. The Middle East. In the last year, it would seem that the United States Government might have misjudged the stability of Lebanon and the Lebanese Government and the effectiveness of its army and the willingness of Syria to cooperate with some of our strategists. Are you satisfied with the basic information you've gotten there? Were you misinformed in the first place?

A. No. We knew that what we were attempting to help with was a very complex, complicated problem. And what we and our allies joined together to do was based on the necessity for a withdrawal of the foreign forces that were in there.

Remember that when this all started, Israel, because of the violation of its own northern border by the Palestinians, the P.L.O., had gone all the way to Beirut. War was being fought in the city streets there with the P.L.O. The casualties among civilians were probably exceeding those of the military. And the other factor, they were also Lebanese soil. And we went in to help bring about the removal of the P.L.O. from Beirut. We went in to help bring about the removal of the P.L.O. from Beirut. We went in to help bring about the removal of the P.L.O. from Beirut.

But even so, the purpose of the troops of Italy, the United Kingdom, France and ourselves were there to monitor less help maintain order. We went in to help bring about the removal of the P.L.O. from Beirut. We went in to help bring about the removal of the P.L.O. from Beirut. We went in to help bring about the removal of the P.L.O. from Beirut.

Now for quite some time, progress was made. And I still have to say right now the progress, the meetings that have taken place in Switzerland, would not have taken place had all of this not been done. But we did. It is true that when Syria balked and began supporting some of the rebel elements, that our own idea was that for Libya or for Lebanon to have a government that was not friendly to make peace with those militias and find some kind of a broad-based government. And they set out and they tried to do that. It didn't succeed. But the very fact that all of us began to be subject to terrorist attacks and equipment that we had sent out and forth, actually was evidence of the fact that we were succeeding. And we had a good idea of what success knew that one of the steps in having their way was to force the withdrawal of our own forces.

Success and the Price

Q. Was the level of success as you described it, worth the price that we paid, the dead marines?

A. I don't know how you answer this thing that is becoming worldwide now the terrorist method of suicide attacks and so forth. I'd like to say that there is no cause that's worth the life of any man, but we know that isn't true.

We did not succeed in what we thought could have gone forward. There has not been anything that we're still working at it there, the Lebanese Government. One thing also, we did a good job of training their military and equipment that we had sent out and forth, actually was evidence of the fact that we were succeeding. And we had a good idea of what success knew that one of the steps in having their way was to force the withdrawal of our own forces.

Q. Well, that's a good note for us to close on. Thank you very much, Mr. President.

been trained to handle. But that doesn't change the need for us to continue with the Middle East overall with what must take place. And we hope that we can be helpful, that we can bring about, and that is a meeting of the moderate Arab states and Israel and the bringing about of peace just as Egypt and Israel brought about peace.

Q. If the circumstances were the same, but hypothetically, we were back four years and you were running against President Carter, would you be hammering him for the death of the marines in the Beirut massacre?

A. No. If I had all the knowledge that I presently have about the situation, there was one thing, whether it was campaigning or just making speeches in the past that I have always recognized and that is that there are a number of areas in which only a President has the information, all the information, on a situation. And those who criticize are criticizing without having access to that same information.

Q. Would you veto the bill requiring the United States Embassy to be moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem?

A. I am hoping I won't have to. But like the several previous Presidents before me, I think that that is a most unwise thing. It should never have been introduced in our Congress. The effort should never have been made because if we are to have a negotiated peace that will end once and for all the hostility between the Arab world and Israel, then that would be one of the things to be negotiated. The place of Jerusalem, the West Bank, things of this kind. These are all the matters that must be negotiated between these forces. And the United States has no right to put itself in a position of trying to lean one way or the other on those areas for negotiation.

Assistance to Rebellion

Q. About Central America, Mr. President. I wonder if I could ask you to explain or justify how the United States can go about assisting people who are, as you called them, freedom fighters, who are seeking to overthrow a Government that we have diplomatic relations with and answer, if you could, critics who are worried that this is increasing our involvement in Central America.

A. Well, the answer to that, is first of all, this particular Government of Nicaragua is a government that was set up by force of arms and the people have never chosen it. It's a revolutionary government. And that Government, in violation of the United States at a time when it was a revolutionary force trying to become a government, has promised that it would not aid the guerrillas in El Salvador who are attempting to overthrow a duly elected government and a democratic government. And they have violated that. The guerrillas are literally being directed from bases near Managua. They're being supplied by that Government. And the other factor, why I have referred to them on occasion as freedom fighters, is because many of them are elements of the same revolution that put the Sandinista Government in force.

The revolution against the Somoza dictatorship and our Government under the previous Administration, sack back and never lifted a finger on behalf of Somoza and then when the fighting was over did start to give financial aid to the revolutionary government to help it install itself. And had to cancel that when the people who were fighting was doing. During the revolution against Somoza, the revolutionaries appealed to the Organization of American States, of which we are a member also, to ask Somoza to step down and end the bloodshed. And the Organization of American States asked for a statement of what were the goals of the Democracy. And they were provided: a plural government, free elections, free labor unions, freedom of the press, human rights observed — those were the goals of the revolution, submitted in writing to the Organization of American States.

Followed Pattern of Castro

After they got in, they followed the pattern that was followed by Castro in Cuba. Those other elements, who were not Sandinista, other groups who wanted and they thought all of the same thing, democracy. To rid themselves of a dictatorship. Those elements were denied participation in the government. Arrivals were made. There were some who were exiled and there were some, I'm afraid, who were executed. And many of the people now fighting as so-called Contras are elements of the revolution. And it is an overthrow that they're fighting for as it is a demand that they be allowed to participate in the government and that the government keep its promises as to what it had intended for the people.

And I see no dichotomy in our supporting the Government, the democratic government of El Salvador and the Contras here — and we made it plain to Nicaragua — made it very plain that this would stop when they keep their promise to restore the democratic rule and have elections. Now, they've finally been pressured, the Contras' lot, that's a great deal of things that we've scheduled it for next November. But there isn't anything yet to indicate that election will be free and that the kind of rubber stamp that we see in any totalitarian government. There aren't any rival candidates, there aren't any rival parties and how would they campaign without a free press?

Q. Well, that's a good note for us to close on. Thank you very much, Mr. President.

Reagan Suggests He Would Veto Bill to Shift Embassy to Jerusalem

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that provided benefits to individual people, including Medicare and Social Security. He said he would seek to "reorder those programs" if re-elected, but promised not to "pull the rug out from under anyone who is presently dependent on" them.

He said that if re-elected he wanted to simplify the tax structure to "broaden the base" of Federal revenues. He said this would be done by taxing people who are now "totally tax free" or who are paying "well below what they should be paying." Again, he declined to be specific, saying "This is a study that has to be made."

On military spending, Mr. Reagan said the reduction in the rate of increase that he recently accepted would defer but not eliminate spending on weapons, systems and manpower. Other savings are to be achieved by changing certain "government practices," he said.

The President said that tensions with the Soviet Union "are frankly more evident in rhetoric than in actuality." He said he was "hopeful" that Moscow would resume nuclear arms talks but he said, "We're not going to sit here and negotiate with ourselves while they sit out there not participating, waiting to see what we'll finally come up with."

tion's difficulties in relying on Syria, Jordan, the Lebanese Government and the Lebanese Army.

"We knew that what we were attempting to help with was a very complex and complicated problem," he said.

He said the Lebanese Government had "no military or political support" and "find some kind of broad-based government" and "didn't succeed."

But he added "the very fact that all of us began to be subject to terrorist attacks" was "evidence of the fact that we were succeeding."

Mr. Reagan was then asked: "Was the level of success, as you describe it, worth the price that we paid, the dead marines?"

He paused to reflect, then added in sober tones: "I don't know how you answer this thing that is becoming worldwide now the terrorist method of suicide attacks and so forth. I'd like to say that there's no cause that's worth the life of any man, but we know that isn't true."

The bill, introduced by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York, a Democrat, has more than 200 sponsors in the Senate and more than 200 in the House. There have been recent signs that its supporters are seeking a compromise with the Administration.

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As for the bill to move the United States Embassy to Jerusalem, Mr. Reagan said he would veto it. He said he was "hopeful" that Moscow would resume nuclear arms talks but he said, "We're not going to sit here and negotiate with ourselves while they sit out there not participating, waiting to see what we'll finally come up with."

past, Administration officials' have sought to avoid acknowledging American support for efforts to overthrow the Government in Managua.

Today Mr. Reagan was asked to "explain or justify" such covert aid, and he did so by saying that the Government had come to power by "force of arms," abandoned its promises to restore democracy and assist insurgent guerrillas in El Salvador.

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